

... ARMING HERSELF IN LEADEN STUPOR: JANET'S REPENTANCE
AND THE ROLE OF FEMALE ALCOHOLISM

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George Eliot's fiction contains a wealth of figures who are touched by intoxication: both through their own imbibing, and (sometimes literally) because of others' drinking. As Kathleen McCormack¹ has noted, the instances of drink are closely tied to the "manifestoes of realism in the early fiction" and that "...despite George Eliot's reputation for earnestness, responsibility, and even ponderousness, a remarkable number of her characters stagger through the novels with their perceptions blurred and reason distorted by unwise consumption of brandy, wine, beer, ale, patent medicines, and opium" (2, 40). In drawing freely upon this trait and using it frequently within her fiction, Eliot continued to firmly establish herself as an author of realism—undauntedly portraying all facets of true human existence. This extended to the presentation of a drunken female in her work *Janet's Repentance*, contained within the collection of stories, *Scenes of Clerical Life*, written for and serialized in John Blackwood's *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, beginning in 1857. Within this novel is the title-character who, although mentioned by critics (McCormack among them) as perhaps Eliot's "most important treatment of intoxication" still goes largely unexamined.

The title character of Janet Dempster occupies that rare and startling role: as a woman who is clearly *not* of inferior status, yet is afflicted by the ravages of alcoholism. Janet also exists as a singular figure in that Eliot depicts her progressing through the myriad stages of alcoholism in visceral detail: utterly possessed by the throes of physical need, frantically desirous for change, alcohol-fueled despair, recovery, fearful temptation, and ultimately freedom from her affliction. This story functions simultaneously as a condemnatory oratory against marital savagery (the critical lens with which it is examined most frequently), a religious epistle, and a tale of personal triumph. And, while Eliot's realistic portrayals are still occasionally tinged by romanticized depictions and, in the case of *Janet's Repentance*² a religious awakening speeds her salvation³; the genuine, yet tender, treatment of this character demonstrate the purposeful intent with which Eliot formed her. The demon Janet Dempster struggled with was—as Eliot's publisher Blackwood himself reluctantly agreed—no unordinary occurrence for women of the time⁴. That Eliot championed to shed light and aid in the public's awakening to those private battles (shown in her insistence to Blackwood that those details remain) is further proof of the

importance she felt this story, and its heroine, had within literary creations of the nineteenth century.

The Role of the Community

Janet's town of Milby is not an abstemious one by any means. McCormack points this out in her study of Eliot, and emphasizes that the "narrator attaches strong irony to his description of the Milby drinking as a remedy for imagined ills" (46-7). Eliot's narrator elaborates:

Milby might be considered dull by people of a hypochondriacal temperament, and perhaps this was one reason why many of the middle-aged inhabitants, male and female, often found it impossible to keep up their spirits without a very abundant supply of stimulants. (197)

Far from "dull," Milby seems a hub of nearly constant action, with certainly no cessation in the public gossip regarding all its members. Fascinatingly, in her manuscript, Eliot had originally included even more ironic detail on the drinking habits of the adult females of Milby: "...and not more than half a dozen married ladies were frequently observed to become less sure of their equilibrium as the day advanced..."⁵ Including such a blatant reference to the excessive drinking of *other* women would have somewhat lessened the stigma of Janet's own intoxication. Whether this change was also the result of Blackwood's influence, or a conscious decision by Eliot, the results are the same. In the published version of the story, Janet is now the only representative of female intoxication—and, as the sole figure she bears the full brunt of internal and external judgment. The masculine camaraderie of the pubs (frequently punctuated by Dempster's drunken taunts) has a feminine complement in the social ladies' circles. But in both situations, the characters freely indulge in bullying, power struggles, and social condemnation.

Lisa Surridge⁶ correctly asserts that Eliot's story was groundbreaking on many fronts in its inclusion of realistic issues. Among other critics, Surridge also acknowledges the extremely "controversial" yet salient step that Eliot took in including a female alcoholic within her story, as alcoholism was usually relegated to male characters. Most significantly, Surridge posits that Eliot "entered the wife-assault debate in highly unconventional ways,...by depicting [it] as a community issue rather than as a private matter. 'Janet's Repentance' suggests that the abused woman's recovery depends on the community that receives and heals her" (106). This is shown to be accurate to a degree: Janet's recovery from alcohol stems from the assistance of others but also from her own reinsertion into the community.

Yet while Milby society eventually serves to comfort and bolster Janet, I would argue that this idea of a "community" is actually more *limited* in scope: initially made up of only a few individuals who had either previously harbored feelings of goodwill towards Janet,

or were already her friends and thus more than willing to continue their assistance (either privately or publicly) of the beleaguered woman. Additionally, her interactions with and treatment by the community is highly controlled by her social status. Far from offering complete and unbiased support, the peripheral characters at first seem to function as a Greek chorus: from a distance, they provide foundational details on the early days of Janet's marriage, her young beauty and promise. While Surridge is correct in demonstrating the importance of the community, her position that the story "...shows the community as responsible in its *highest* duty for the acceptance, healing, and integration of the battered woman" (130 emphasis mine) ignores the fact that the community only rallies to Janet's cause *after* the series of cataclysmic events which alter the course of the story: the final confrontation between Janet and Robert in which he drunkenly throws her from the house, her wholehearted acceptance of Mr. Tryan and his evangelical ministrations, Dempster's accident and subsequent demise, and Janet's final wrestling free of the torments of alcoholism. While her mother Mrs. Raynor provided constant love and a ready shoulder; Mrs. Pettifer, a friendly face and sanctuary; and Mr. Jerome, a sympathetic bearing—there really is a great lack of actual community involvement during the real periods of crisis in Janet's life. That she is enveloped into the community in the greater sense only after she has begun to shed her old habits shows that Milby is perhaps not so beneficent after all.

The female members of the community also display a general avoidance of Janet. Far from rushing in to encircle the beleaguered woman, they maintain a careful distance: This is both a matter of safety, and of practicality: Robert's violent drunken outbursts are quite well known to the entire community. Even Janet's good friend Mrs. Pettifer avoids the Dempster home because of Robert's intoxicated fury, as she explains, "...I can't help seeing her often, though I've never been to the house since Dempster broke out on me in one of his drunken fits" (215). Janet's mother also carefully regulates her interactions with Robert, and, while she willingly accompanies Janet to her home, these are calculated trips: "She had evidence enough of it in Janet's visits to her; and, though her own visits to her daughter so timed that she saw little of Dempster personally...." (269). Because of the infamous nature of Robert's behavior and the fear it has caused the women of Milby who might have extended greater friendship to Janet, the domestic home *is* a tightly controlled and closed space: Janet finds no comfort inside its walls, and only meager consolation within society.

Yet, at the outset, the general "community" presented by the story is primarily comprised of women, including Mrs. Pettifer, who will later prove

to be a great ally to Janet. These women discuss her "strange" condition with all the enjoyment of a typical ladies-circle⁷. As Surridge notes, this "thin cohesion of gossip—the text's early manifestation of community" (121), is the relationship initially established between Janet and the town. The scene in Mrs. Linnet's parlor is quintessentially Victorian—women gathering, moving aside their piddling and mindless "projects" ("Miss Linnet's skill in fancy-work appeared to have gone through more numerous phases than her literary taste; for the japanned boxes, the alum and-sealing-wax baskets, the fan-dolls, the 'transferred' landscapes on the fire-screens, and the recent bouquets of wax-flowers, showed a disparity in freshness which made them referable to widely different periods" (208))⁸. Humorously, the women gathered are in spiritual and physical (Eliot's infamous evocation of the "clerical sex" here shows the added allure of Mr. Tryan to some of his female followers) awe of their new clergyman, and desirous to gain his approval through their continued good works, even as they simultaneously gossip on the states of others, with varying degrees of kindness and tolerance.

Mrs. Pettifer, who is seen to be the most biased in favor of Janet, acts as her champion: reminding the women of Janet's numerous charitable acts, her kindness, and of her fear of Robert's anger. When the spinster Miss Pratt comments on Janet's folly in her marriage, it is Mrs. Pettifer who reminds her that "there weren't many young men fit to talk to Janet" (214). As will be discussed later, it is also (and only) Mrs. Pettifer that mentions Janet's childless state as another trial that she must endure—a comment which is strangely not picked up and debated further by the women present.

The language of the parlor conversation is also remarkable: the women chat in their own middle-class dictated "code-speak" about Janet's domestic situation and about her drinking—neither of which is mentioned clearly. Here again is a convention completely ruled by class: Janet, the object of interest, is of the same social status (and, significantly, it would appear, higher in educational status) as the other women. As such, there is a prescribed set of rules of conduct when speaking of her, even though the behavior she indulges in and the state of her domestic life are at the height of town scandal.

First, the women cast over the Dempster's history, beginning with Janet's mother:

"Poor Mrs Raynor! she's glad to do anything for the sake of peace and quietness," said Mrs Pettifer; "but it's no trifle at her time of life to part with a doctor as knows her constitution."

"What trouble that poor woman has to bear in her old age!" said Mary Linnet, "to see her daughter leading such a life!—an only daughter too, that she dotes on."

"Yes, indeed," said Miss Pratt. "We, of course, know more about it than most people, my brother having attended the family so many years. For my part, I never thought well of the marriage;.... Mrs Raynor herself was against the connection at first; but she

always spoiled Janet,...No one but myself, I think, foresaw the extent of the evil." (214)

Despite the outward show of decorum, Miss Pratt still does not hesitate to extol the breadth of her own wondrous skill and foresight: she both knows "more about it" than the rest of the community, and was able to predict that as a spoiled child in a bad match, Janet would turn to drink. Less inclined towards verbal barbs are Mary Linnet and Mrs. Pettifer, who mourn the inherent sadness of the situation, and include Janet's mother as one of the circumstantial victims.

Next come the praise of Janet's former mental qualities, which Miss Pratt brings herself to mention because, despite early potential, Janet's sin has rendered them nearly nonexistent:

"It is a thousand pities," said Miss Pratt..."for I certainly did consider Janet Raynor the most promising young woman of my acquaintance;--a little too lifted up, perhaps, by her superior education, and too much given to satire, but able to express herself very well indeed about any book I recommended to her perusal. There is no young woman in Milby now who can be compared with what Janet was when she was married, either in mind or person." (215)

It is within Mrs. Pettifer's wistful reply that the first mention of Janet's intoxication appears. While it is not a particularly subtle allusion, it is still cloaked in the language of polite conversation, "She comes to me sometimes, poor thing, looking so strange, anybody passing her in the street may see plain enough what's the matter...Only last night when I met her, I saw five yards off she wasn't fit to be out..." (215). Miss Pratt also abides by the rules of discourse, but is not bound by any real fondness for Janet, thus her contribution to the discussion is far less kind: "Why, even to my brother—and a medical attendant, you know, can hardly fail to be acquainted with family secrets—she has always pretended to have the highest respect for her husband's qualities. Poor Mrs Raynor, however, is well aware that every one knows the real state of things. Latterly, she has not even avoided the subject with me."

Under the guise of their charity works, the women within Miss Linnet's parlor have performed a very neat self-dissection of Janet's personal history, the Dempster home, and the behaviors of its inhabitants. While the three women contributing the most to the conversation on Janet view her with varying degrees of pity and sympathy, all are still bound by middle-class conversational conventions in both what they mention and how it is referenced. Never once do such ugly or obvious words such as "drunk" or "alcohol" or "beatings" come up—yet all the women, and indeed, all of Milby, know these elements to be facts within the Dempster house²⁴. Instead, throughout the story Janet is constantly referred to as "looking strange," with "strange" acting as the signifier for intoxicated, or indicative of Janet experiencing the negative after-effects of alcohol and physical abuse.

Even Mr. Tryan, who, in his ministrations to the ill and the stricken, would have seen people experiencing things similar to Janet, is bound by the same rules of decorum when he mentions her: "...I found Mrs Dempster there. I had often met her in the street, but did not know it was Mrs Dempster. It seems she goes among the poor a good deal: She is really an interesting-looking woman. I was quite surprised, for I have heard the worst account of her habits—that she is almost as bad as her husband" (219). Tryan's comments also play directly into the socially perpetuated stereotypes of female drunks: he is "surprised" to find the same Mrs. Dempster whose drinking "habits" he knows looking "interesting": middle class code to express his shock at finding a well known female drunk encapsulated in the form of a beautiful woman unselfishly attending to the sick. Tryan must couch his revelations, yet by placing his comments at the conclusion of the parlor chapter, Eliot's meaning is clear: Janet, a woman in the grip of alcoholism, who is frequently abused by her drunken husband, is actually performing more tangible acts of purposeful charity than the women who have just been so eagerly discussing her.

Eventually, Janet is cast out of the domestic sphere—significantly, under the cover and privacy of night (and, Surridge insists: "into a rich and supportive network of friends", a claim I have already taken issue with). Yet, for all of Janet's initial hopes that being thrown out may turn out to be a new beginning, this was not the way she wished her torment to resolve. Indeed, Janet goes to great lengths to achieve any sort of resolution of her domestic anguish that does not involve leaving her home. In her investigations of other Victorian-era literature, Surridge demonstrates the perceived void that lay outside the home, and this fear of the "out there" is clearly shared by Janet. Despite the cruelty he visits upon her, Janet cannot fathom ever leaving Robert, or exiting their home:

He had no pity on her tender flesh; he could strike the soft neck he had once asked to kiss. Yet she would not admit her wretchedness;¹⁰ she had married him blindly, and she would bear it out to the terrible end, whatever that might be. Better this misery than the blank that lay for her outside the married home. (268)

After he initially casts her out, Janet wishes that she was dead, rather than experience such a fate: "This, then, was what she had been travelling towards through her long years of misery! Not yet death. O! if she had been brave enough for it, death would have been better" (274-5). Janet's inability to picture a happier life for herself "outside the married" home reflects the feeling echoed by other Victorian-era heroines who regarded the abuses that they knew as more tolerable than the unknown terrors of being anchorless and unprotected.¹¹ The change made to the manuscript somewhat undercuts the level of Janet's own personal pride—Blackwood appears again to have been attempting to "soften" the perceived persona of the heroine¹². Yet despite the change, it is clear that Janet feels culpability for her situation in her very choice to marry Robert. That she had tried to be a dutiful wife is

evident, yet, as the sage narrator reminds us: "Cruelty, like every other vice, requires no motive outside itself—it only requires opportunity."

Surridge is apt to mention the "permeable" Victorian home, and indeed, the fear of detection, of public acknowledgement of the private terrors within the house certainly informs Janet for much of the story, although it is clear from the discussions of the women's circle and the narrator's later comments that Janet's lot is no secret—rather, it may be the *most* often discussed aspect of domestic life in Milby. The community is connected in its desire to cloak the true goings-on at the Dempster house, and Janet herself is desperate that the public façade she exhibits hides much of her private torment. Yet the talk continues: "The various symptoms that things were getting worse with the Dempsters afforded Milby gossip something new to say on an old subject," proving both that the Dempster's situation has long been established as a focal point of gossip *and* that despite the awareness of her increasingly desperate position, no real action was taken to assist her (296).

After Robert's death and Janet's move towards Evangelicalism and away from the bottle, the entire community witnesses her change. Now that she is no longer impeded by an abusive drunken husband, nor imbibes alcohol herself, they finally show her unchecked support and love. Eliot's narrator alludes to the foundational "ground of respect towards widows" that might have had an "influence" on the townspeople's hearts, but the shift in attitude towards Janet is quite extraordinary—and has been motivated almost entirely because of the cessation of alcohol. "Even neighbors who had no strong personal interest in her, could hardly see the noble-looking woman in her widow's dress, with a sad sweet gravity in her face, and not be touched with fresh admiration for her—and not feel, at least vaguely, that she had entered on a new life in which it was a sort of desecration to allude to the painful past" (316).

Even in their renewed acceptance of Janet, religious and demographic loyalties (and their accompanying prejudices) still linger. Among the gladdened spirits of the improved outlook of Janet's life, old bitternesses remain—Mrs. Lowme's comment on her change shows the stigma over Janet's religious conversion: "It's very inconsistent in her, I think, turning round in that way, . . . and especially in a woman of her habits; she should cure herself of *them* before she pretends to be over-religious"¹³⁹. (315). Doctor Pilgrim's reply is that Janet seems to be curing herself entirely through her own "strong will," despite his notice of her "good deal of depression for want" of alcohol, which, in his own middle-class code, he describes as "stimulants."

Janet is embraced by old friends "who had a real regard for her"; by the Miss Linnets who were "eager to meet Mr Tryan's wishes by greeting Janet as one who was likely to be a sister in religious feeling and good works"; and by Mrs. Linnet and Mrs. Jerome out of their surprised good feelings over Robert leaving Janet his money "in that handsome way, to do what

she liked with it," (316). The matter of Janet's new found Evangelicalism, a potential cause for strife with those supporters of old Mr. Crewwe, is finally dispatched. Eliot's narrator swiftly and neatly sweeps this prospective concern away by slyly claiming that, "Errors look so very ugly in persons of small means—one feels they are taking quite a liberty in going astray; whereas people of fortune may naturally indulge in a few delinquencies" (316-7). Here, "delinquencies" could also just as easily refer to drinking—showing the true aberration of Janet's middle class intoxication, but also providing justification for the communities' willingness to forget the past.

While the presence of the community throughout the story is undeniable, the role that community plays is not as easily determined. Far from being a solid and united force, the community is portrayed in a highly realistic fashion—some inhabitants of Milby are petty and jealous, others feel overwhelming sympathy, while many seem content to simply observe. That the community is relatively united in both its immobility to actively help Janet, and its re-adoption of her once she has cast off any desires to drink, demonstrates the inherently fickle nature of people in groups. Ultimately, Janet is reabsorbed within a portion of the community (the reader learns that certain members are unable to overcome their past misgivings) which allows the reader to see that her personal restoration was necessary to become a member of Milby society.

Drinking as an Uncontrollable Desire

The inclusion of female drunkenness was already a somewhat extraordinary element to Victorian fiction, especially when coupled with social status. Eliot understood the paradox perfectly: middle class women drank, yet society was so set in ignoring both this and incidents of middle class domestic abuse that any inclusion of these in her fiction was treading dangerous professional ground. So Eliot invented an ingenious device within *Janet's Repentance* which saved her heroine from total damnation on the grounds of the irredeemable sins of drunkenness: she made Janet a battered wife. By placing Janet within a home of strife, constant terror, and unprovoked violence, her drinking could be seen as an *almost* comprehensible response—one way to numb the realities she was faced with. Yet this numbing could also risk aligning Janet with Dickens's most pathetic waifs who used alcohol to dull the pain of hunger. So Eliot went to certain character extremes. Janet is not only drawn as middle class, but also highly educated and well-read. She is not just good looking, but exotically beautiful. She is not simply bright, but a promising wit. Every possible positive attribute was poured into Janet's character—further underscoring that drinking was something she took to only as a terrible last resort.

In her cathartic meetings with Mr. Tryan, Janet reveals the first time she turned to alcohol in an attempt to lessen her pain. In the company of Tryan, genuine and properly descriptive words to match her actions and

experiences are finally utilized, but additionally, drinking is positioned as a reaction to something, and not as a desire of her own:

I loved my husband very dearly when we were married, and I meant to make him happy—I wanted nothing else. But he began to be angry with me for little things and.... I don't want to accuse him.... but he drank and got more and more unkind to me, and then very cruel, and he beat me. It made me almost mad sometimes to think that all our love had come to that.... I couldn't bear up against it. I had never been used to drink anything but water. I hated wine and spirits because Robert drank them so; but one day when I was very wretched, and the wine was standing on the table, I suddenly.... I can hardly remember how I came to do it.... I poured some wine into a large glass and drank it. It blunted my feelings, and made me more indifferent. (286)

Janet's language is very direct, but she (and the reader is meant to view it this way) clearly links the onset of her drinking with the need to escape (if only mentally) her situation with Robert. The fact that she mentions both their initial love for each other and the desperation and insanity she felt at that love's demise make her appear even more justified in seeking an external outlet. There is also the sense that Janet was not in control of her own movements when she began to drink, she "can hardly remember" how the first incident of drinking occurred, she feels powerless against those feelings in her self-medicating quest. There is a deliberate distancing between her desires, and the pull of the alcohol.

Perhaps motivated by the presence of the Evangelical preacher, she classifies her yearnings as a demonic force—again describing them as unholy, and otherworldly—utterly not coming from a natural "her." As Thomas Reed Jr. mentions in his work on Robert Louis Stevenson's *Jekyll and Hyde*¹⁴, this was part of the "commonplace notions of temperance rhetoric: alcohol is Satan's drink; and men as a result become demons under its influence" (222). This is certainly true of Dempster, as evinced both by his inhuman treatment of his wife and in the commentary of other townsfolk, as in the parlour scene when Miss Linnet claims "...if iver Old Harry appeared in a human form, it's that Dempster" (213). It is also how Janet describes the constant pull of alcohol, the cravings that mortify her, but she cannot resist:

After that, the temptation was always coming, and it got stronger and stronger. I was ashamed, and I hated what I did; but almost while the thought was passing through my mind that I would never do it again, I did it. It seemed as if there was a demon in me always making me rush to do what I longed not to do.... I feel sure that demon will be always urging me to satisfy the craving that comes upon me... (286-7)

In categorizing her desire for alcohol as a "demon" Janet is both isolating herself from full responsibility for her drinking, and demonstrating

that for her, the power of alcohol (since it is demonic) is too great to resist: it is not an earthly longing, but rather a "dreadful trial" sent from God. Beyond simply viewing those under the influence of alcohol as devil-like, or demonic, regarding alcohol itself as a evil spirit also reinforces Janet's position as a victim—driven to drink by years of violence from within her own home, feeling forsaken by God even to the point of contemplating suicide. Janet's escapism through drinking again appears as a justifiable course of action, perhaps as the *only* action¹⁵

Aside from Mr. Tryan, the one male voice who actively comments on Janet's drinking is Mr. Jerome. As a character, he embodies a fascinating mix of qualities, which allow him room to comment on Janet's situation with only the most altruistic intentions. Mr. Jerome is shown as epitomizing both highly masculine traits: he has abundant and well executed fertile farm lands and self-designed blacksmith and carpenter's shops. Yet he also possesses the capacity to be gentle and sympathetic, which is demonstrated in his tenderness with little Lizzie and in his desires to perform acts of charity among the community. In his conversations with Mr. Tryan, Janet's situation comes up, and the kindly man voices his own concerns, and his own assessment of her behaviors:

"They talked of his bein' fond of a extry glass now an'then, but niver nothin' like what he's come to since...His wife, too, was al'ys an uncommon favourite o' mine—poor thing! I hear sad stories about her now. But she's druv to it, she's druv to it, Mr. Tryan. A tender-hearted woman to the poor, she is, as iver lived; an' as pretty-spoken a woman as you need wish to talk to." (244)

Again, the ultimate sadness behind Janet's drinking is described, and Mr. Jerome emphasizes (also perhaps in deference to the type of man he is addressing) that it is not a desire of her own, but something she is "druv" to by Dempster's cruelty¹⁶. As with other aspects of Janet's life, here again are several different voices from within the community collaborating to form a single coherent picture: Janet drinks because her husband (also a drunk) beats her, not because she wants to. The significant difference between Robert and Janet's drinking is that Robert is shown to drink to excess willingly—he needs no external stresses to drink (although those do cause an increase), he drinks for the pure physical enjoyment, something that Janet never does¹⁷.

Lisa Surridge also sees Eliot's placement of Janet within an abusive marriage as a means to somewhat rationalize her drinking: "First, it [the wife as alcoholic] reverses commonly held Victorian views on cause and effect where alcohol and violence were concerned, suggesting that abuse has caused Janet's drinking, rather than vice versa. Secondly, it challenges the sentimentalization of the passive wife, since Eliot portrays Janet's passivity as caused by a drunken stupor rather than by elevated feelings of marital loyalty" (110). The moments of Janet's "passivity" are quite interesting; because they only correspond with the times she is drunk. At

other moments when she is in possession of all her faculties, she is shown as quite defiant to Robert:

Janet's bitterness would overflow in ready words; she was not to be made meek by cruelty; she would repent of nothing in the face of injustice... Proud, angry resistance and sullen endurance were now almost the only alternations she knew. She would bear it all proudly to the world, but proudly towards him too; her woman's weakness might shriek a cry for pity under a heavy blow, but voluntarily she would do nothing to mollify him, unless he first relented. (268)

Although Eliot herself was rebellious in her staunch refusal to completely eliminate both the drinking and the domestic abuse, she understood the psyche of her readers. In order to view the heroine as a sympathetic character, in order to care that in the end she did find "redemption," Janet would have to be in a situation in which drinking could be, if not completely condoned, at least understood. By showing many distinct members of the community—from the servants within the Dempster home, to Janet, to Mr. Tryan, all the way to respected town elders—reinforce the opinion that drinking is something done only as a last resort and reaction to a horrible situation, Eliot allows her readers room to also become Janet's champions. And, by showing the progression of Janet's triumph over intoxication (with Mr. Tryan's support, but through her own efforts), Eliot demonstrated that Janet was ultimately redeemable—leaving her as a dignified and fulfilled woman, worthy to stand as Mr. Tryan's last but greatest earthly achievement.

Janet's Drinking as Unnatural

As Dempster's professional world begins to develop cracks in its foundations (the quitting of valuable client Mr. Jerome, the subsequent "taxing" from Mr. Pryme, his frustrating involvement in Mr. Armstrong's lawsuit) he in turn imbibes increasingly large quantities of alcohol—to the point where even his "well-satisfied clients, who were of opinion that the punishment of his wickedness might conveniently be deferred to another world, noticed with some concern that he was drinking more than ever..." (266). His professional failings lead to other, more vile deteriorations as well. Although his abuse of Janet is a well known Milby "secret," the increase in his consumption causes a rise in the "sum of home misery" and, it is clearly inferred, an increase of her own drinking.

This cyclical pattern of Janet's escalating troubles is continually cast up against the backdrop of the changing seasons—a "natural" occurrence to throw the very unnaturalness of her drunkenness in more obvious relief:

Poor Janet! how heavily the months rolled on for her, laden with fresh sorrows as the summer passed into autumn, the autumn into winter, and the winter into spring again. Every feverish morning, with its blank listlessness and despair, seemed more hateful than the

last; every coming night more impossible to brave without arming herself in leaden stupor. The morning light brought no gladness to her: it seemed only to throw its glare on what had happened in the dim candle-light...(267)

The tenets of nature—daybreak, sunshine—usually utilized as symbols of renewal and anticipation, are ineffectual for Janet: demonstrating that her continued drinking and the shame of her inability to control her “demon” has cut her off from even these most simplest joys of natural life.

Throughout the story Janet is linked to nature in numerous ways—and this relationship fluxuates in kind as the grip of alcohol tightens and loosens. Janet’s mysterious beauty is often described in the language of nature, and these descriptions always emphasize the unremitting personal turmoil she contends with: “there are those sad lines about the mouth and eyes on which that sweet smile plays like sunbeams on the storm-beaten beauty of the full and ripened corn” (228)¹⁸. Seeking some solace from her mother, Janet arrives at Mrs. Raynor’s cottage, which stands “facing a roadside meadow from which the hay is being carried.” In both these instances, nature and the natural order signify the “correct” modes of life—the seasons change and the fields must be harvested, just as crops need the rains to reach ripe completeness. Yet the juxtaposition of Janet’s own trials with the storm “beaten” fields, and her morning recovery with the sun “play[ing]” upon the fields highlight both her total separation from nature, as well as how closely aligned she might be with the natural world if not for the sin of drunkenness which marks her as different and holds her apart from it.

Janet’s oscillating swings of persona often result in her being described as analogous to plants. After the first instance of Janet’s beatings from Robert is relayed, the narrator envisions the pain of Janet’s mother, who he believes must maternally intuit the pain her daughter is experiencing. The narrator imagines the maternal sorrows of Mrs. Raynor, “Was it for this that you looked proudly at her when she came back to you in her rich pale beauty, like a tall white arum¹⁹ that has just unfolded its grand pure curves to the sun?” (225). Janet is depicted symbolically here as a plant with strength and a future—not only naturally able to harness the power of the sun, but also, it seems, showing off her beauty and inner promise. This type of categorization will reoccur, but in very precisely altered terms, as the woeful state of Janet’s current life is again captured through these semantic pairs.

Later, when Janet takes leave of her mother, Mrs. Raynor is gladdened to see her momentary high spirits, but fears what new emotional apparition she *might* find in her daughter at nightfall:

...the curtain of cloud seems parted an instant only that we may measure all its horror as it hangs low, black, and imminent,... Janet looked glad and tender now—but what scene of misery was coming next? She was too like the cistus flowers in the little garden before the window, that, with the shades of evening, might

lie with the delicate white and glossy dark of their petals trampled in the roadside dust. When the sun had sunk, and the twilight was deepening, Janet might be sitting there, heated, maddened, sobbing out her griefs with selfish passion, and wildly wishing herself dead. (229)

Being likened to a flower (here a ephemeral and feeble one) continues to establish the relationship Janet has with nature—made tenuous because of her own shame, her inability to resist the pull of alcohol, and her reduced nature.

Ultimately, when Janet has overcome all the exposed temptations and desires to drink, and emerges as a changed woman—the plant metaphor returns, but with an added sense of satisfied finality. “Even anti-Tryanite prejudice could not resist the fact that Janet Dempster was a changed woman—changed as the dusty, bruised, and sun-withered plant is changed when the soft rains of heaven have fallen on it...” (325). In addition to a natural reference, the religious element is included here, yet Janet is still likened to a recovered plant: battered by natural (and unnatural) factors, but one that has been revived.

The utterly un-symbiotic relationship that Janet and her mother have (Janet’s constant guilt that “instead of being her mother’s comfort, she had been her mother’s trial” is palpable throughout) is also relayed in terms of flora, as Mrs. Raynor fears her own inability to provide the support Janet so obviously needs (281). “The poor patient woman could do little more than mourn with her daughter: she had humble resignation enough to sustain her own soul, but she could no more give comfort and fortitude to Janet, than the withered ivy-covered trunk can bear up its strong, full-boughed offspring crashing down under an Alpine storm” (276). That Janet is depicted as “full-boughed” and possessing strength is also noteworthy, for it demonstrates that despite her personal trials, she is still viewed as containing much inner-force. This need for a strong foundation is also emphasized when Janet’s vitality is described, matching the force of her personal beauty, but also being, “the strength of the vine, which must have its broad leaves and rich clusters borne up by a firm stay” (281).

This, like so many other paralleled references within the story: positive/negative, spring/winter, day/night, suggests that during the times she has been under the power of alcohol, all the early potential contained within Janet was reduced to a shell. It is significant to mention that the unnatural wedge which distances her from being in total harmony from nature is the sin of intoxication—which, as I have asserted, is not a personal weakness, but one brought on through severe emotional and physical strains.

The narrator’s inference in these descriptions is to suggest that were she free of the physical ill-effects wrought by alcohol, and the crushing grief over her indulgences, Janet might not be that trampled delicate flower, an overpowering tree in need of support, nor even a dependent vine: she might finally make a more permanent connection with the natural world.

And, just as the changing seasons previously signaled only a new backdrop for her ongoing pain; as Janet's struggles begin to yield action and beneficial changes, so does the language of nature which conducts her. The natural similes throughout the story are not limited to simply pointing out Janet's weaknesses—they are also present as she begins to find hope and eventual freedom; both from Robert, and from the bottle. Waking up in Mrs. Pettifer's home after her cathartic communion with Mr. Tryan, the metaphors of bountiful promise within nature—previously unattainable—now pierces the fog of Janet's consciousness, and she is able to feel real joy in the splendid show of nature:

On Sunday morning the rain had ceased, and Janet...saw, above the house-tops, a shining mass of white cloud rolling under the far-away blue sky. It was going to be a lovely April day. The fresh sky, left clear and calm after the long vexation of wind and rain, mingled its mild influence with Janet's new thoughts and prospects. She felt a buoyant courage that surprised herself, after the cold crushing weight of despondency which had oppressed her the day before:... For a delicious hope—the hope of purification and inward peace—had entered into Janet's soul, and made it spring-time there as well as in the outer world. (294)

Whereas before the sun only existed to throw the horrors of the previous evening into garish relief, now it serves finally to shine upon Janet's reborn hopes and expectations. And, where previously the spring had no symbolic meaning for her, now it carries the expectation of renewal, "purification" (which will also come through Tryan's influence), and the long-hoped for inner calm. Here again, the struggles with intoxication and with Robert are metaphorically mirrored in terms of the "vexation of wind and rain"—attempts to naturalize the utterly unnatural elements of marital abuse.

Aligning Janet's waxing and waning struggles to the natural world continues to signify that Janet is a woman apart—a totally different type of intoxicated figure. The very fact that Janet has the possibility, the capability, to achieve some sort of necessary connection with nature, marks her as different. Thus, not only is Janet set apart by her beauty, her education, her intellect, but also by her communion with the natural world. The periods of separation from it (due to her moments of intoxication and personal shame) are positioned to seem utterly abnormal, and alien: to further underscore the ramifications of her unnatural involvement with alcohol.

Conclusion

Janet's Repentance is not simply a story of religious conversion or moral redemption, as it has been primarily viewed by critics. The fact that Eliot addressed the dual issues of domestic abuse and female alcoholism in a story that also incorporated issues of religious salvation is a significant nod to her acute understanding of her readership, and proof, as critics have

addressed, of her steadfast adherence to literary realism within her fiction. Writing to Blackwood, Eliot said, "The real town was more vicious than my Milby; the real Dempster was far more disgusting than mine; the real Janet alas! had a far sadder end than mine, who will melt away from the reader's sight in purity, happiness and beauty."²⁰ This again underscores the firm adherence to maintaining the story as she has written it (especially when later in the letter she says "There is nothing to be done with the story, but either to let Dempster and Janet and the rest be as I see them, or to renounce it as too painful. I am keenly alive, at once to the scruples and alarms an editor may feel, and to my own utter inability to write under any cramping influence...") and the very clear possibility that she had written the story from personal observations.

Despite the hesitation and attempts by Blackwood to change or lessen the references to drunkenness within the story, the character of Janet Dempster remained: an educated, married, middle-class woman who was also an alcoholic trapped in an abuse marriage. In this, Eliot challenges the stereotype of the "type" of female who drank to excess. Additionally, the marital violence within the Dempster home addressed the blindness of society in believing that domestic abuse cases ceased as the income level rose. In lifting the façade that such horrors simply did not occur in supposedly comfortable middle-class homes (or, conversely, that they just happened among the lower-classes), Eliot was steadfast in her condemnation of society's ignorance and folly.

In demonstrating that Janet must find personal salvation (here, relief through religion and escape from her alcoholic dependence) before becoming a true member of the Milby community, I am seeking to show Eliot's portrayal of the isolating affects of alcohol. In her depiction of the closeted and shamed nature of Janet's drinking and the fevered gossip mongering of the town, Eliot also highlights the heightened levels of scrutiny on middle-class alcoholics, when and if they were suspected or discovered, as their actions drew more reaction from their surrounding communities. That she suggests that the actual location was more "vicious" than the literary double infers that another target of critique is the highly hypocritical morals and judgment of community mentalities. While Janet is eventually welcomed back, I demonstrate that it is only a possibility because she is both a widow and no longer a drunk, and even then some factions still reject her.

That Janet Dempster exists simultaneously as a target of town scandal and a dispenser of charity, a drunk and a wit, humiliated as well as admired, epitomizes the extraordinary duality of the non-traditional female drunk. She also serves as an emblem of Eliot's critique of the blind eye society would prefer to turn towards women in Janet's situation—and her admonishment of that dangerous course. Eliot allows Janet a means of escape which hinges heavily on her ability to embrace a new form of spiritual acceptance, which suggests that even to the most devoted realists the chances of anyone (not just women) finding full release from the bonds of alcohol might be slim.

Notes

¹ All references to McCormack are taken from her influential work: *George Eliot and Intoxication: Dangerous Drugs for the Condition of England*, Macmillan Press, 2000, unless otherwise noted. In my exploration—both here with Eliot, and within the entire study—I differ from McCormack in the specific focus of my concentration. Whereas she includes intoxications of all types (alcohol, opium, laudanum, etc.) I only include instances of drinking, and only by the non-traditional female drunk.

² All quotes and references to the primary story are taken from *Scenes of Clerical Life*, edited by Thomas A. Noble, Oxford UP, 1985.

³ While Eliot undoubtedly intended the religious conversion Janet undertakes to correspond with her personal salvation; the focus of my attention is not on her spiritual awakening, but on her alcoholism and the subsequent responses to it.

⁴ McCormack also cites the letter from Blackwood in which she records his reluctant agreement that “alcoholism in women is an effective embodiment of realism” as he claims: “Still it is true to nature” (43).

⁵ Folios 11/12. Referenced in *Scenes of Clerical Life*, George Eliot, edited by Jennifer Gribble, Penguin Books, 1998.

⁶ The Abused Woman and the Community: “Janet’s Repentance” from *Bleak Houses: Marital Violence in Victorian Fiction*, Lisa Surridge, Ohio UP, 2005.

⁷ Eliot makes several notable comments on the cruelty of women to other women: once, in the ironic guise of the narrator, witnessing a scene of jealousy between schoolgirls: “Young ladies, I suppose, exhaust their sac of venom in this way at school. That is the reason why they have such a harmless tooth for each other in after life” (226). Additionally, the narrator admires, “their powers of sarcasm” and the “pungent irony [and] incisive satire” the girls display. The idea that women actually do take a more gentle view of each other after their school days is refuted by the other instance. This comes in the form of a husband’s silently attributed commentary: witnessing his wife’s diatribe against Janet’s “flighty” ways, “Mr Phipps, amiable and laconic, wondered how it was women were so fond of running each other down” (269).

⁸ Eliot’s own distaste for filling one’s time with such useless busy-work is evident in her male narrator’s cataloging of Miss Linnet’s “serious” endeavors.

⁹ The notable exception to this code of discourse is from Robert Dempster himself. The reader’s first glimpses of the heroine are of a drunken Janet—and her husband does not sanitize his words in his torrent of abusive language. “Curse you! you creeping idiot!” “What, you’ve been drinking again, have you? I’ll beat you into your senses” (224). Eliot and Blackwood again disagreed on the particulars of language selection, as “creeping” was substituted by the publisher for Eliot’s more blunt “drunken.”

¹⁰ Quite interestingly, at this point Noble’s footnotes inform the reader that within Eliot’s manuscript, this line originally stated: “she would show no sign of suffering to the world,” in place of “wretchedness”—emphasizing Janet’s pride and shame over public awareness of her marital condition.

¹¹ The fear of the unknown world “out there” and away from the perceived “security” of the domestic hearth (even if it included abuse or neglect) is perhaps best shown by Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. After Jane flees Rochester’s home she wanders, aimlessly, sleeping outside and unprotected: ...my night was wretched, my rest broken: the ground was damp, the air cold: besides intruders passed near me

more than once, and I had again and again to change my quarters: no sense of safety or tranquility befriended me... Do not ask me, reader, to give a minute account of the day; as before, I sought work; as before, I was repulsed; as before I starved; but once did food pass my lips. At the door of a cottage I saw a little girl about to throw a mess of cold porridge into a pig trough. 'Will you give me that?' I asked" (280-281). The utter lack of charity and aid Jane meets with, in general (including at a church where the clergyman is away) also adds to the sense of abandon and vulnerability for the woman outside of her home.¹ This is the culmination of what Janet fears most.

¹² Blackwood also wanted alterations to the character of Tryan, as when he wrote to her, worried that "Your sketches this time are all written in the harsher Thackerayan view of human nature... When are you going to give us a really good active working clergyman, neither absurdly evangelical nor absurdly High Church?" Eliot's reply, that, "The collision in the drama is not at all between 'bigotted churchmanship' and evangelicalism, but between irreligion and religion. Religion in this case happens to be represented by evangelicalism'... the conflict lay between immorality and morality—irreligion and religion. Mr. Tryan will carry the reader's sympathy" demonstrates where she felt the true tensions of the story dwelled (173-4).

He was also relieved that Eliot appeared to have modified the concluding chapters, as he wrote: "I was a little puzzled when I came to the climax about the bottle of brandy but you have rearranged it beautifully and it contributes to the air of truth," suggesting that Eliot's adherence to a realistic portrayal of a drunk (including the strong temptation produced by the broken bottle) had perhaps, won him over, even slightly (179).

References to Eliot's correspondence taken from *Selections from George Eliot's Letters*, edited by Gordon S. Haight, Yale UP, 1985.

¹³ McCormack discusses Tryan as Dempster's "adversary," and reminds her readers of Tryan's own teetotaling lifestyle (another considerable difference between the two men): "Whereas Dempster is saturated by alcohol, law, and money, Tryan, though dying of tuberculosis, is free from polluting combinations... When Mrs. Linnet offers him some wine, he reminds her that he is a 'Rechabite,'" (71). Harrison (who McCormack also cites) includes the following on the Rechabite movement: "In 1835 the temperance movement itself founded a teetotal friendly society: the Rechabites. At first they lacked actuarial expertise, but in the 1860s they began to expand fast, and by 1868 boasted 13,000 adult members" (324).

¹⁴ *The Transforming Draught: Jekyll and Hyde, Robert Louis Stevenson and the Victorian Alcohol Debate*, 2006.

¹⁵ Throughout this work, the narrative voice shifts and is often confused between the narrator and the character interchange. However, I do attribute Janet's view of drink as a "demonic force" to her own reflections, and not to the narrator's interjections. See *The Novels of George Eliot: A Study in Form*, Barbara Hardy, Oxford UP, 1967, for further exploration of narrator involvement.

¹⁶ Despite Mr. Jerome's claim to have always had "a likin'" for the Dempsters in "spite o' iverything", and his overall kindheartedness, it might also be necessary to note his own streak of slight hypocrisy: he allowed Dempster to manage his affairs for years with full knowledge of Janet's treatment, and only fired Dempster after his attacks on Mr. Tryan: "I'll encourage no man as pessesecutes religion."

¹⁷ Robert Dempster can come off as simply a thematic character, without realistic motivation for his actions. In this, Dempster epitomizes the literary figure of "the brute," but still shares qualities (sadistic and cruel) enough with real figures

documented at the center of wife-beating cases to be viewed as more than just a transparent literary figment.

¹⁸ There are several obvious comparisons between Janet and Eliot's later character Dorothea Brooke of *Middlemarch*. Both are described as possessing a strange beauty —Dorothea is called "handsome" and demonstrating a certain "charm" and, like Janet, is much connected to nature: "She loved the fresh air and the various aspects of the country" (9-10). Yet descriptions of her are also tempered by the perceptions of her as too much a "devotee": as a woman whose "large eyes seemed, like her religion, too unusual and striking" (9). Dorothea has Evangelical inclinations, as did Eliot in her youth, and as Janet will eventually come to have. *Middlemarch*, Penguin, 2003. For further reading, see *Everywhere Spoken Against: Dissent in the Victorian Novel*, Valentine Cunningham, Oxford UP, 1975.

¹⁹ The arum is a native British plant, often used as an ornamental plant in drawing-rooms, characterized by a large white or yellow spathe. *Oxford English Dictionary*.

²⁰ From 11 June 1857 letter (Haight 174).

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